

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR STORING AND RETRIEVING EQUIPMENT INSPECTION AND MAINTENANCE DATA

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to methods and apparatus for storing and retrieving information regarding inspection and maintenance of equipment, particularly transportation equipment including aircraft, ships, and land vehicles. The invention also relates in particular to methods and apparatus for storing such information on the equipment to which it pertains.

Background of the Invention

Many types of equipment require ongoing inspection and maintenance to ensure that the equipment is in proper and safe working order. This is true for stationary industrial equipment, and also for aircraft and other mobile equipment transportation equipment. Regular inspection and maintenance may be required not only for practical and economic reasons, but may also be mandatory for regulatory compliance. For example, in order to maintain airworthiness status, specific components and assemblies of both private and commercial aircraft must undergo inspection, plus maintenance or overhaul as required, at regulated intervals. These intervals are typically established in terms of service hours on the component in question, or service hours on the aircraft.

A commercial airliner may have dozens of components requiring regular inspection and maintenance, and this work must be performed with painstaking care by highly qualified

technicians. At each inspection point, a technician must gain direct visual and physical access to the component being inspected. Gaining such access may be a complicated exercise in itself. For example, inspection hatches for rudder and elevator components on a modern jetliner may be located high above the ground, so a technician may require scaffolding or mechanized equipment (e.g., a “cherry picker”) in order to gain access to such components.

Having gained access to a particular component, the technician must know exactly what steps need to be taken to inspect the component properly, and must know what maintenance or repair activities are required in the circumstances, according to the condition of the component as determined during the inspection, and the time interval since the previous inspection or maintenance procedure. Accordingly, the technician may need to have on-the-spot access to relevant provisions of the aircraft’s maintenance manuals, including technical specifications and inspection checklists, as well as any work orders which may have been prepared for the specific inspection. As well, it may often be necessary or desirable to have access to records of previous inspections, service, and maintenance.

The technician might conceivably have this information in his or her memory, but it is not desirable to rely on memory in connection with work in respect of which an error might jeopardize passenger safety. Therefore, the technician may need to carry several reference documents during the inspection. If the technician has forgotten any particulars of the inspection or maintenance to be performed, or has forgotten to bring required reference documents to the point of inspection, he or she may need to leave the inspection point to obtain or retrieve the necessary

information, and then return to the inspection point to complete the required inspection or maintenance service.

Once the inspection has been made, and any necessary maintenance has been completed, the technician usually will need to record certain particulars of the work; e.g., date and time of inspection, identity of the technician, and details of maintenance or repairs performed. In addition, it will typically be necessary or desirable to transfer such information to a central record-keeping facility so that the maintenance history and the current serviceability status of the aircraft can be conveniently reviewed. For many aircraft operators, such as commercial airlines and military air forces, it may be particularly efficient and desirable to have this inspection and maintenance information stored in a computer database remote from the aircraft in question, and to have the information transferred to the database as soon as possible after the inspection or maintenance work has been completed, in order to have access to up-to-the-minute information on the condition of the aircraft and its availability for service.

This desirable objective may be difficult to achieve satisfactorily where the subject information must be transferred to the central record-keeping facility from a technician's handwritten notes, because there may sometimes be a delay between the time of the inspection or maintenance and the time of entry in the central records, even when the technician acts with reasonable diligence. In other cases, the technician may inadvertently neglect or forget to enter the information until a considerable time after the inspection or maintenance was performed, and in the worst case the information may never get entered at all. In addition, there is the risk that the information in the

technician's notes will be transferred inaccurately or incompletely, not to mention the further risk that the information might be lost completely if the technician's notes are accidentally misplaced or destroyed before the information transfer can be carried out.

5 Because of factors such as those outlined above, security and storage of information related to inspection and maintenance of aircraft and other types or equipment, as well as timely access to information required for such inspection and maintenance, can be inconvenient and inefficient, and correspondingly time-consuming and expensive. One example of prior attempts to address these problems is U.S. Patent No. 5,931,877, issued on August 3, 1999 to Smith (et al.),
10 which discloses a system providing electronic access to a central data warehouse which stores information from technical manuals relating to the various pieces of equipment being supported by the system, as well as historical maintenance information for specific pieces of equipment. Maintenance technicians may acquire access to the information in the central data warehouse by use of a hand-held computer, or portable maintenance aid ("PMA"), via wireless transceivers or high-
15 speed land lines. The technicians therefore do not need access to hard copies of the technical and historical maintenance information for the equipment they are working on, and they can transmit data regarding their maintenance tasks back to the central data warehouse through use of the PMA.

20 The PMA forms part of a fundamental element of the Smith system, namely, a test means for identifying failed equipment components. More specifically, the test means provides for automated downloading, to the PMA, of built-in test (or "BIT") data available from a bus in particular equipment units such as sophisticated military aircraft and weaponry components.

Accordingly, the Smith system's practical usefulness is therefore best found in association with such specialized equipment adapted for BIT logic analysis, and it is not readily and economically adaptable for use with other types of equipment. Perhaps the most significant drawback of the Smith system, however, is the fact that technicians' work will be seriously hampered or delayed in the event of breakdown of communications with the central data warehouse, which will typically be the technicians' only convenient source of reliable technical and historical information which may be needed to complete a particular maintenance task..

For the foregoing reasons, there is a need for a method and apparatus for recording and storing inspection and maintenance information in a central data storage facility promptly upon completion of the inspection or maintenance work, without requiring transfer of the information from handwritten notes. In addition, there is a need for a method and apparatus for providing paperless access to inspection and maintenance reference information, such as information in technical service manuals, or historical inspection and maintenance information, directly at the point of inspection or maintenance. Furthermore, there is a need for a method and apparatus for storage of technical and historical inspection and maintenance information directly on the equipment in question, preferably in the immediate vicinity of the point of inspection or maintenance. The present invention is directed to these needs.

Brief Summary of the Invention

In general terms, the present invention provides a system and method whereby a technician performing equipment inspection or maintenance services, particularly mobile equipment such as aircraft, can have direct paperless access, at the actual point of inspection or maintenance, to historical maintenance records and reference information pertinent to the equipment unit being inspected or serviced. In accordance with the invention, such records and information are stored in a central database remote from the equipment unit, and the technician may access the database by means of a portable computing device linked to the database. In addition, a portion of the pertinent records and information may be stored in one or more read-write memory chips, each encased in a memory button mounted in or on the equipment unit, preferably in locations conveniently proximate to corresponding points of regular inspection and maintenance. As well, the information may be stored in the memory of the portable computing device.

In accordance with the invention, the technician may use a memory button probe, electronically linked to the portable computing device, to read the information stored on the memory buttons, and also to record new information on the memory buttons relating to the inspection or maintenance task carried out by the technician on the occasion in question. The technician may then update the central database by transferring the information on the memory buttons to the database via the memory button probe and the portable computing device. Because the database is updated promptly upon completion of each inspection and maintenance task, persons accessing the database may obtain up-to-the-minute information regarding the equipment unit's state of maintenance and its availability for deployment.

Accordingly, in one aspect the present invention is a system for accessing and storing data pertaining to inspection and maintenance of an equipment unit, said system comprising:

- (a) one or more memory buttons, each said memory button being adapted to permit electronic storage of data therein, and to permit reading of data stored therein;
- (b) a memory button probe, said probe being adapted for transferring data to, and for reading data stored in, the said one or more memory buttons;
- (c) a portable computing device having a memory;
- (d) a first data transfer link, whereby the portable computing device is in electronic communication with the memory button probe;
- (e) a central computer having a database for storing data relating to the equipment unit, said central computer being at a location remote from the equipment unit; and
- (f) a second data transfer link, whereby the portable computing device is in electronic communication with the central computer and database;

wherein each memory button is mounted on or in the equipment unit.

The portable computing device may be a laptop computer, but in the preferred embodiment of the system, the portable computing device will be a "personal digital assistant", or PDA. The second data transfer link may be a physical electronic connection, or it may be in the form of a wireless connection. In the preferred embodiment, the second data transfer link will be a wireless connection via a computer network such as the Internet, with data transmissions across such connection being password-protected and encryptable. In a further embodiment, the second

data transfer link will be a connection through a telecommunications satellite system.

In the preferred embodiment of the system, the central computer will be a network server accessible to authorized user computers through a computer network, which may be a local area network (LAN), or a wide area network (WAN) such as the Internet. In the preferred embodiment, the network server will be protected by a firewall to prevent intrusion into the server by hackers. As well, access to the network server by authorized user computers will be password-protected.

In another aspect, the invention is a method of storing and retrieving inspection and maintenance information regarding an equipment unit, said method comprising the steps of:

- (a) providing a memory button, said memory button being adapted to permit electronic storage of data therein, and to permit reading of data stored therein;
- (b) installing said memory button on or in the equipment unit in convenient proximity to a selected inspection and maintenance point;
- (c) providing a memory button probe adapted for transferring data to, and for reading data stored in, the memory button;
- (d) providing a portable computing device having a memory, and having a first data transfer link whereby said portable computing device is in electronic communication with the memory button probe;
- (e) providing, at a location remote from the equipment unit, a central computer having a database, said central computer having a second data transfer link whereby the

central computer is in electronic communication with the portable computing device;

- (f) as desired, storing technical information relating to the equipment unit in the database of the central computer;
- (g) as desired, storing technical information relating to the equipment unit in the memory button;
- (h) as desired, engaging the memory button probe with the memory button, so as to read selected data stored therein, and to transmit said selected data via said first data transfer link to the portable computing device;
- (i) as desired, transmitting a signal from the portable computing device to the central computer via said second data transfer link, instructing the central computer to transmit selected data from the database to the portable computing device via the second data transfer link;
- (j) performing an inspection or maintenance task on the equipment unit;
- (k) entering task performance information into the portable computing device relating to the performance of said inspection or maintenance task;
- (l) electronically transmitting a signal, corresponding to said task performance information, from the portable computing device to the memory button, via said first data transfer link and the memory button probe, so as to store said task performance information on the memory button; and
- (m) electronically transmitting a signal, corresponding to said task performance information, from the portable computing device to the central computer, via said second data transfer link, so as to store said task performance information in the

database.

The portable computing device may be a laptop computer, but in the preferred embodiment of the method, the portable computing device will be a PDA. The second data transfer link may be a physical electronic connection, or it may be in the form of a wireless connection. In the preferred embodiment, the second data transfer link will be a wireless connection via a computer network such as the Internet, with data transmissions across such connection being password-protected and encryptable. In a further embodiment, the second data transfer link will be a connection through a telecommunications satellite system.

In the preferred embodiment of the method, the central computer will be a network server accessible to authorized user computers through a computer network, which may be a local area network (LAN), or a wide area network (WAN) such as the Internet. In the preferred embodiment, the network server will be protected by a firewall to prevent intrusion into the server by hackers. As well, access to the network server by authorized user computers will be password-protected. Accordingly, in the preferred embodiment, the method of the invention further comprises the step of accessing the database of the computer network server from a user computer via connection to a computer network, plus the step of making a back-up copy of information from the database on the user computer..

Brief Description of the Drawing

Embodiments of the invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying figure, in which numerical references denote like parts, and in which:

5 **FIGURE 1** is a schematic block diagram of an equipment inspection and maintenance data storage and retrieval system according to the present invention.

Detailed Description of the Preferred Embodiment

10 Referring to Figure 1, the system of the present invention, conceptually indicated by reference numeral **10**, includes one or more read/write memory buttons **20** installed at selected locations in or on an equipment unit **30**. The memory buttons **20** are computer chips sealed in an armoured container (typically stainless steel), and each has a unique and unalterable identification number recorded directly onto the chip. Memory buttons are available with variable features and capabilities, such as the “iButton” (TM) manufactured by Dallas Semiconductor Corp. The memory
15 buttons **20** used for purposes of the present invention have “read/write” chips; i.e., the chips have a memory which can be read, and data can also be written into the memory.

 Reading the memory buttons **20** and writing new data onto them is accomplished using a suitable memory button probe **22** connected to a computing device. One known example
20 of a memory button probe is the “Blue Dot Receptor” (TM) manufactured by Dallas Semiconductor Corp. Each memory button **20** has a contact means which, when engaged by a corresponding contact means associated with the memory button probe **22**, creates a data transfer link whereby data

stored in the memory button **20** may be read, or whereby data may be transferred to the memory button **20**. In Figure 1, engagement between the corresponding contact means of the memory button probe **22** and a selected memory button **20**, as well as the resulting transfer of data to or from the memory button **20**, is conceptually denoted by the broken lines indicated by reference numeral **21**.

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The system **10** includes a portable computing device **24** having a memory, and the portable computing device **24** is electronically connectable to the memory button reader **22** by way of a first data transfer link **23**. The first data transfer link **23** may be an integral component of the memory button reader **22**, or it may be a separate wired connection. The portable computing device **24** may be a laptop computer. However, in the preferred embodiment, the portable computing device **24** will be a hand-held computing device such as a PDA. Several types of PDAs are readily available, such as the PALM PILOT line of products manufactured by Palm, Inc. Whatever form the portable computing device **24** may assume, it is programmed with software appropriate to enable receipt of information from the memory buttons **20** via the memory button reader **22**, and to enable transfer of information to the memory buttons **20** via the memory button reader **22**.

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Also provided is a central database computer **26**, which is connectable to the portable computing device **24** by way of a second data transfer link **25**. In the preferred embodiment, the central database computer **26** will be a Internet server, and may be located remotely from the equipment unit **30**. The central database computer **26** is configured and programmed to receive and store data relating to the equipment unit **30**, including technical specifications and procedural information from operation and maintenance manuals for the equipment unit **30**, plus historical

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information regarding previous inspections and maintenance work carried out in connection with the equipment unit **30**. As well, the central database computer **26** can receive signals from the portable computing device **24** via the second data transfer link **25** requesting information from the database to be downloaded to the portable computing device **24**. In the preferred embodiment, both the portable computing device **24** and the central database computer **26** are programmed with encryption and decryption software to maximize security of data transmissions.

The second data transfer link **25** may be a hard-wired connection to the central database computer **26**, either directly or through a computer network such as the Internet. In the preferred embodiment, the second data transfer link **25** will be a wireless link via the Internet. In another embodiment, the second data transfer link **25** will be a wireless communications link through a telecommunications satellite system.

In the preferred embodiment, the central database computer **26** will be a network server accessible to computers of authorized users through a computer network, which may be a local area network (LAN), or a wide area network (WAN) such as the Internet. In the preferred embodiment, the network server will be protected by a firewall to prevent intrusion by hackers. As well, access to the network server by authorized user computers will be password-protected.

The operation and advantages of the method of the present invention may be readily understood from the following description. One or more memory buttons **20** are installed at selected locations in or on an equipment unit **30**. The equipment unit **30** may be any piece of equipment, but

the invention has particularly beneficial application to mobile equipment units such as aircraft. Advantageously, the memory buttons **20** may be installed in locations proximate to components on the equipment unit **30** which require inspection or maintenance at particular intervals. A typical commercial airliner, for instance, has a large number of components which must be inspected, and serviced as necessary, on a regular basis in order to maintain the aircraft's airworthiness status. The unique identification number of each memory button **20** may be recorded (in the central database computer **26**, for example) as correlating to a specific component or location on the equipment unit **30**. For exemplary purposes, if memory buttons are installed in association with components **A**, **B**, and **C** of a particular equipment unit **30**, the memory button associated with component **A** may be referred to as memory button **20A**, the memory button associated with component **B** may be referred to as memory button **20B**, and so on, as indicated in Figure 1.

When a technician wishes to inspect or service component **A**, he or she gains access to component **A** as appropriate. In some cases, the technician's task may simply be to inspect component **A** and record the fact that this inspection has been carried out, and this recording function is completed easily in accordance with the present method. The technician engages the contact means of the memory button probe **22** with the contact means of memory button **20A**, whereupon data will be written onto memory button **20A**, including the date and time of contact, as well as the identity of the technician. For this purpose, the technician may be assigned an identifier, such as a password which must be entered into the portable computing device **24** in order to use the memory button probe **22**. However, other ways of identifying individual technicians or users will be readily apparent to those skilled in the art, without departing from the essential concept of the invention.

Continuing with the example, the information recorded onto memory button **20A** may also be downloaded to the central database computer **26**, by corresponding commands entered on the portable computing device **24**, which is programmed with software appropriate for execution of such functions.

In a particular situation, the technician may need to complete a specific maintenance task on component **A**, and to make detailed records of such task. In accordance with the invention, the technician may complete the task and then make corresponding entries on the portable computing device **24**, which entries are then written onto memory button **20A** by means of the memory button probe **22**, and also downloaded to the central database computer **26**. Accordingly, the next time a technician comes to inspect or service component **A**, a detailed record of previous inspections and maintenance in connection with component **A** will be available to the technician on the spot, by downloading the information stored in memory button **20A** to the portable computing device **24**. This information may also be available from the central database computer **26**. However, a distinct advantage of the present invention is that such historical information will always be available right at the point of inspection, even if the second data transfer link **25** or the central database computer **26**, or both, happen to be inoperative for any reason.

It will commonly be necessary or desirable for a technician to make reference to technical information (such as information contained in maintenance manuals for the equipment unit **30**) either before or during performance of a particular inspection or maintenance task. For example, the technician may wish to confirm technical specifications to which a particular component has to

be set, to study electrical wiring diagrams, or to determine or confirm procedural steps which need to be followed to complete the task at hand. In accordance with the present invention, the technician may obtain prompt access to the required information by sending a corresponding request message from the portable computing device **24** to the central database computer **26**, which in turn downloads the requested information to the portable computing device **24** whereon it may be viewed by the technician. In this way, the invention substantially eliminates the need for inspection and maintenance technicians to have access to hard copies of technical and maintenance manuals, which can be quite voluminous for complex equipment units such as commercial aircraft.

In addition, if the technician so desires, selected information downloaded from the central database computer **26** may be written onto the memory buttons **20** so that it will be conveniently available to the next technician who performs inspection or maintenance on the component or components in question. The requirement or desirability of downloading reference information from the central database computer **26** for purposes of subsequent inspection or maintenance tasks may thus be reduced if not eliminated, facilitating even more convenient and expeditious execution of such tasks. Moreover, as with historical inspection and maintenance information previously discussed, downloading reference information to the memory buttons **20** provides the additional benefit that such information will always be available right at the point of inspection, even if the second data transfer link **25** or the central database computer **26**, or both, happen to be inoperative for any reason. Such information may also be stored in the memory of the portable computing device **24**, thus creating a further back-up copy.

In the preferred embodiment, the central database computer **26** is a network server which may be accessed by authorized users via a computer network such as the Internet. Accordingly, an authorized user may conveniently download and view up-to-date inspection and maintenance and operational status information relating to any particular equipment unit associated with the system, by connecting to the network server from a user computer virtually anywhere in the world. In addition, such authorized user may make a back-up copy of such information, thus providing even further assurance that the information will be preserved and available as needed.

In the preferred embodiment, a technician in the field will thus have direct access to the Internet, thereby obtaining a number of practical benefits. In addition to having access to technical and historical information in the central database, the technician may search other helpful resources accessible via the Internet, directly and conveniently from the portable computing device **24** which the technician has during inspection or maintenance work, even if such work is being carried out from high on a scaffold or some other unusual position. As well, the technician is able to communicate via electronic mail ("E-mail") via the portable computing device, which may be advantageous for purposes including ordering spare parts needed for the task at hand, or for seeking case-specific advice and guidance from other technical personnel who may be far away from the site of the work.

It will be readily appreciated by those skilled in the art that various modifications of the present invention may be devised without departing from the essential concept of the invention, and all such modifications are intended to be included in the scope of the claims appended hereto.